

Bingo + Bad Weather + Gear Problems = *No Fun*

By Lt. Sean Michaels

The EA-6B carrier-qualification (CQ) detachment was going well, and it was the last night to finish training for our Cat. I pilots. As an ECMO CQ instructor, I was accustomed to completing our CQ requirements late on the last night of the det.

My pilot, a Marine, needed four traps and a touch-and-go to qualify. We were scheduled to hot-switch into a jet whose pilot also needed four traps and a touch-and-go. It was the beginning of summer, and the first night launch was not until 2130. We expected a very long night, but I never imagined how long or painful the flight would be.

The crew consisted of the Marine pilot, a student ECMO in the backseat, and me. Our day had started at noon when we briefed and flew an uneventful, hour-long flight to complete our daytime trap requirement. We completed debriefing around 1630, then the pilot and I took hour-long naps. We briefed the night flight at 1930, then sat in the ready room and waited for the jet. At 2200, the jet we were waiting for was in the Case III pattern for its last trap, so we walked to flight-deck control. To our dismay, the jet was bingo-on-the-ball, and after boltering, the crew headed to NAS North Island, about 80 miles away.

Being a Prowler naval flight officer, I neither was surprised nor agitated that the jet I was about to climb into was now on an emergency-fuel profile to the beach and would be back in no sooner than an hour and a half. We would play with the hand dealt to us. We went back to the ready room and waited for our jet to refuel at the beach and fly back.

At 2345, we made the trek back to flight-deck control. Our jet trapped just before midnight and was parked in front of the tower on the foul line. We walked onto the flight deck at midnight. The crew, however, was not allowed to open their canopies because of the jet's location next to the foul line. They had to wait for a lull in the sequence of landing aircraft, which finally came at 0015. Unfortunately, we couldn't get in the jet, because our maintainers were working on the left engine. I finally climbed into the jet at 0030, and my pilot joined me 30 minutes later; he had been standing

on the foul line waiting for the past hour.

It now was 0100, and our maintainers still were doing some final checks on our left motor, which was shut down. We eventually got the left engine started and taxied to the cat at 0125. For those of you not familiar with CQ, taxiing to the cat at that time of night, with four traps and a touch-and-go remaining, is not a good position to be in. If you get those requirements knocked out in two hours, you are doing very well.

At 0130, we were shot off catapult 1; one of our fellow Cat I pilots had taken off just before us. The "Prowler Ball Show" now was underway, as we were the only two jets airborne. Our first pass was a touch-and-go, and my pilot had a nice pass. On the next two passes, we trapped and sat on the cat with just less than 7,000 pounds of gas. After the bad hand that had been dealt to us, we were doing the very best we could, and I thought we might even qual on one bag of gas.

We boltered on the next pass though, so Paddles told us to go hook up. We were getting low on fuel. Paddles said they would count the next touch-and-go as a trap, saving us the fuel required to take another cat shot. "Great decision," I thought—one that would allow us to complete the event on one bag of gas.

However, fatigue had begun to set in, and we were waved off on our next pass. We finally completed a touch-and-go, and the next trap would be for a final qual. After getting a 4.5-mile hook to final bearing, we dirtied-up and completed our landing checks. Five miles behind the ship, our gas was 3,400 pounds; we were going to be bingo-on-the-ball.

Out the corner of my eye, I saw a red flashing light. I turned to look, and to my horror, I saw we had a flashing wheels-warning light, indicating all three landing gear were not down and locked. Having no time to look at a checklist, I called Paddles and told them we had three good gear indications on our position indicator, but all secondary indications were negative. I called the ball with 3,200 pounds of gas, and I could hear the disgust in our LSO's voice as he said, "Wave off. Wave off. Your lower anti-collision light is

on, and you have no approach light. Wave off!”

We were well below dirty bingo, so I told the pilot to raise the gear. I gave him a steer toward North Island, 70 miles away. I asked my back-seater to check the 70-mile bingo numbers for me and to let me know what he came up with. This being my fourth Cat. 1 CQ det, I was very familiar with the numbers and knew the approximate profile—I just wanted some backup. I also had a gear problem to contend with. During our bingo-climb profile, I asked the back-seater for the bingo numbers, and he asked me what altitude we would be going to. Altitude was a key piece of information I needed backup on. I told the back-seater to forget it and to tune in to North Island

down and locked, but we had no idea which one. At 500 feet, we finally broke out, and I told the pilot to blow the gear. I felt the comforting thuds of our nitrogen-driven gear-blow-down system, but all of our secondary down-and-locked indications still were negative. We would have to land on centerline, catch the arresting wire, and hope for the best. Fortunately, all the gear stayed down and locked, and we took a trap with 1,800 pounds of gas remaining. I looked at my watch; it was 0330.

That next morning, I thought about the previous day’s events, examined our actions, and thought about how we could have handled the situation differently. The first question that came to mind was: Did I risk



ATIS (automatic terminal information service). I had no time to explain what I needed; it was easier for me to get the information myself.

After some terse comms with ATC and the approach controllers, we were vectored for the PAR to North Island. What I did not know was we absolutely would need the precision approach, because ceilings significantly had dropped in the past hour. During the climb, I looked at the fuel gauge, and it read 1,900 pounds. After looking at our distance to the field, I instructed the pilot to immediately begin the descent. I told SoCal approach we would require a trap and verified the arresting gear was rigged on the runway we were being vectored to. Passing through 5,000 feet, we still could not see North Island. All we saw was a faint orange glow through a thick marine layer; this approach was going to be sporty.

Inside 10 miles, we put down the gear and flaps, and as expected, the wheels warning light flashed like a taunting strobe light. One of our gear may not have been

three people’s lives because I felt pressure to qualify my pilot on the last night of CQ? I had relied on my pilot’s honesty when I asked him if he felt rested enough to fly. It had been a long day, and he had said he felt good.

Given those circumstances again, I would choose to fly. However, I could have done something to improve our performance while handling the fuel and landing-gear emergencies. Crew coordination could have been much better during the bingo-profile, which I attribute to the fact it was only the back-seater’s sixth flight in the Prowler. I should have gone over the information in the brief I would need if we had to fly a bingo profile. That improved coordination greatly would have lowered the stress level in the cockpit and allowed me to more thoroughly examine our landing-gear problem. The next time I’m at the boat, I won’t take crew coordination and responsibilities for granted. 🦅

Lt. Michaels flies with VAQ-133.